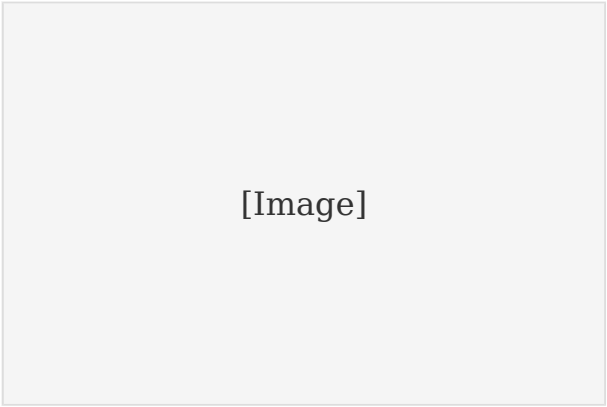
When Was the New Testament Written?

Biblical scholarship has taken note of fairly recent claims made on behalf of 2,000-year-old papyrus fragments in the Magdalen College Library at Oxford, England. Perhaps the most ancient fragments of the New Testament in existence, to some observers this papyrus supports the contention that Matthew's Gospel is an eyewitness account.

Named Magdalen GR 17, this discovery may change the way the New Testament itself is viewed by some scholars. Because the handwriting reflects a style current in the first century before Christ, but which may have died out during the middle of the first century after Christ, some scholars say they have good reason to believe that parts of the New Testament were written much earlier than liberal modern scholarship had supposed. If this dating is accurate, the inescapable conclusion is that the four Gospels were composed by authors who remembered Jesus Christ from personal experience or knew eyewitnesses who remembered Him.

German papyrologist Carsten Peter Thiede made this important discovery in 1994. Professor Thiede is director of the Institute for Basic Epistemological Research in Paderborn, Germany. He is a lecturer at the University of Geneva, Switzerland (since 1978), and a life member of the Institute of Germanic Studies, University of London.



Professor Thiede published his controversial findings in a book called *The Jesus Papyrus* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1996), coauthored by Matthew d'Ancona, deputy editor for the comment section of the *Sunday Telegraph.* Ever interested in restoring public confidence in the authority of the Bible, *The Good*

News presents this interview with Professor Thiede.

GN: Your book, *The Jesus Papyrus,* concerns itself with the reliability and authenticity of the very origins of Christianity. Do you believe that your discoveries have helped prove that the book of Matthew was written as soon as 20 or 30 years after the crucifixion?

CPT: Yes. In fact, the redating of those papyrus fragments would show that the Gospel of Matthew must have been written some time before the mid-60s of the first century. You see, those fragments are copies; they are from a codex [an early manuscript book], which means that there must have been scrolls before the codex was written. And one of those scrolls must have been the original Gospel of Matthew. So we definitely reach a period before the mid-60s for the original Gospel of Matthew.

GN:Do you believe that the New Testament is essentially an eyewitness account and not a second-century version of an oral tradition?

CPT: The Gospels are accounts that go back to the time of the eyewitnesses. I don't think there can be any historical doubt about this, irrespective of papyri. There are numerous reasons-historical, textual, critical, literary, historical reasons-for a dating of the Gospels to the period of the eyewitnesses.

Now, no historian would say that all four Gospels were written by eyewitnesses. Not even the earliest Church historians claimed as much. For example, Mark's Gospel was written-according to a reliable very early tradition-by a companion, a disciple of the apostle Peter, who *was* an eyewitness. So you have a secondhand eyewitness account. Luke says in his Gospel and in Acts that he wrote on the basis of eyewitness accounts. He interviewed eyewitnesses and collected written material on the basis of eyewitness accounts, and from this he wrote his own historical Gospel.

The only two Gospels that may be in the strict sense of the term eyewitness Gospels are Matthew-because he, according to a reliable tradition, was in fact the disciple Levi Matthew-and the Gospel of John, where the author himself and his epilogue at the end of the Gospel both say quite clearly that this was an eyewitness who wrote that Gospel.

So we can say that all four Gospels and the book of Acts were written during the eyewitness period-during the time when eyewitnesses were there, could comment on the text, could correct what was written, could refute it or accept it.

GN:How important is the science of papyrology in determining the authenticity and age of biblical texts?

CPT: Papyrology is a very important science as far as establishing the safe-keeping of the oldest records is concerned. There is nothing older as far as the New Testament is concerned, or indeed classical literature, than the oldest papyri. Establishing them, rediscovering them, analyzing them, translating them, making them available to textual critics-to New Testament scholars in our case-is absolutely vital.

In that sense, papyrology is a determining factor in the analysis of the origins and dating of the New Testament, but one should always admit at the same time that you could study the historicity of the New Testament studies without papyrology. It's one of many elements, but it's not as though without papyri you couldn't analyze the New Testament.

GN:Do you think that *The Jesus Papyrus* strikes quite a blow for the trustworthiness of the Gospel accounts and the traditions surrounding them?

CPT: Yes, indeed. It's an important supplement to the archaeological and historical material which we already have. The reason some people call that papyrus "The Jesus Papyrus" is in fact because those tiny scraps, three of them, contain no fewer than four different sayings of Jesus. Seven times Jesus plays a role on these three tiny scraps, and they correct in a very decisive manner the majority assumption of modern New Testament scholarship as to the origins of the Gospels as historical texts.

GN: How can a few verses in Greek from the book of Matthew really prove that the whole book was written during the lifetime of eyewitnesses?

CPT: Such an assessment depends on the date of the script and on what is actually on the fragments. People would usually talk mainly about the date, but perhaps more important in order to understand what it really all means is what's on the fragments. Those three fragments contain passages from chapter 26 of Matthew's Gospel. There are two other fragments which belonged at one stage to the same codex-to the same original book-and they are now in Barcelona, Spain, with passages from chapters 3 and 5. At one time in Egypt [where all the fragments were discovered] they were part of the same book; now the fragments are split between Barcelona and Oxford.

Those Barcelona fragments are not quite as important as those in Oxford, because

there is less textual information in them, but the important thing is that they belong to chapters 3 and 5 of Matthew's Gospel. So, with fragments from chapters 3, 5 and 26, you can show that these fragments originally did not belong to an early *source* of the Gospels, but to a complete, full, *finished* Gospel.

And, if you can date a codex copy of a finished Gospel to the mid-60s, that of course means that the complete Gospel must have been earlier still. In other words, we do date back to the eyewitness period with those particular fragments.

GN: Based on some of your discoveries, would you say, then, that there is no real gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith-that the four Gospel accounts are reliable historical documents?

CPT: Contrary to popular opinion, the Gospels do claim to be historical documents and were expected to be understood as historical documents. Luke says so in quite unmistakable terms, and the others say it less directly.

What the Gospels are about is, first of all, telling the story of the historical Jesus. In fact, Luke says, to paraphrase his prologue, "Theophilus, you are already a believer, you are beginning the first steps on your way of faith, and now I'm writing this Gospel, dedicating it to you, so that you have the historical groundwork and basis for your faith." This means that faith is an element of the Gospels, but the historical aspect of who Jesus was and what He did is of equal importance.

What a Gospel says, particularly Luke in his prologue, is a statement made by a historian who wants his work to be understood as part of classical historical writing. It's the same technique and attitude that was displayed by any Roman or Greek historian of the time: the combination of a message with its historical basis. They commonly employed this technique, and Luke was no exception.

Tacitus, for example, is a Roman historian who mentions Jesus and Pontius Pilate. He wrote the history of the Romans in Britain, a work called *Agricola*. But, first of all, *Agricola* is a work about the achievements and the greatness of his own father-in-law, Agricola; hence the title of that book. No historian today would say because he praises the achievements of Agricola, who was the procurator of Roman Britain at the time, that it cannot be reliable history.

This combination of a message, like Tacitus praising the glory of the achievements of a father-in-law with sober historical writing, was no contradiction in terms at the time, and this is the attitude displayed by the Gospels.

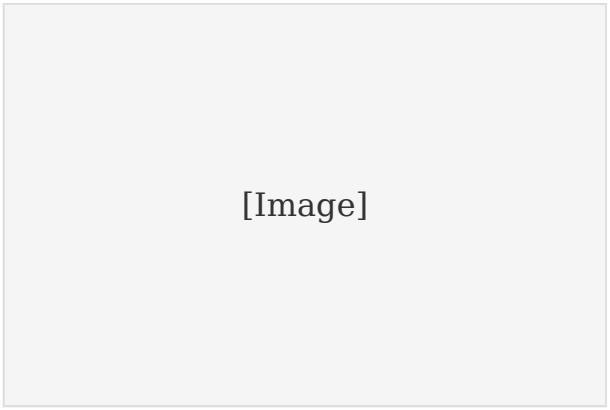
GN: Aside from papyrology, what other arguments are there to show that the Gospel of Matthew was written before A.D. 70, the date of the fall of Jerusalem?

CPT: The fall of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple, in A.D. 70 is a watershed event. But by that time, probably already in A.D. 66, the first Christian community had left Jerusalem. And indeed the leader of that community, James the brother of the Lord, had been stoned to death in 62.

Any historian would accept that Luke's Acts of the Apostles was written before the year 62. I for one don't understand why some theologians can't accept this; this dating is pure and straightforward historical logic. One of the threads running through that book of Acts is martyrdom and telling the story of people who were ready to suffer for the Lord, beginning with Jesus and continuing with Stephen being executed in 35.

One of the other most disruptive events in the history of the first Christian community was the stoning of the brother of the Lord, James, in 62. We know this because a reliable historian-reliable in the sense that he wasn't someone who wanted to prove Christianity right at all costs-the Jewish historian Josephus, mentions this stoning and gives us the year.

A few years later, about 64-65 and at the latest in 67, Peter and Paul were executed, martyred after the fire of Rome. None of these events is mentioned in the book of Acts: the death of James, Peter or Paul.



These papyrus fragments of Matthew's Gospel are thought to date from near the middle of the first century, indicating that the book is indeed an eyewitness account of Christ's life.

The only sensible explanation is obvious to historians: The book of Acts was written before 62. This, of course, means that the Gospel of Luke must be earlier still, and

the Gospels which he used, Mark and Matthew, must be even earlier. So that's a historical and chronological assessment derived from the text itself.

Let me give you one other example from the Gospel usually regarded as the latest, John. Most people would say this dates to the late first century. Now, consider the archaeological facts we have these days. For example, in John 5:1 he [John] describes the healing of the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda.

John tells the story in the past tense. But then he tells readers where it happened as if saying: "If you want to see where Jesus did this miracle, then go to the Pool of Bethesda; it's still there," and he describes it.

The pool was rediscovered-exactly the way he described it-earlier this century, but it had been destroyed in A.D. 70 by the Romans. So this account must have been written and was never changed before the year 70. No one after 70 could have written that there still *is* a pool in Jerusalem called Bethesda. So we have, for the Gospel of John, a historical, archaeological yardstick that indicates it was written before the year 70. And this is only one example of many.

You could go on through the Gospels without any papyrus; you would find argument after argument, pointer after pointer-archaeological, historical, literary, cultural, linguistic-for a date of all the Gospels and Acts before A.D. 70 and indeed much earlier.

GN:You mention in your book that Matthew Levi was an important customs official. Is there any doubt in your mind that he wrote the Gospel of Matthew?

CPT: From papyrology you can't prove or disprove that Levi Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew. Even if everyone accepts that the redating of the papyrus at Oxford is correct, and all the consequences do point to a date of Matthew's Gospel in the late 50s at the latest, then we still couldn't prove via this avenue that Matthew was the author.

However, there are those indications in early history about the authorship of that Gospel, and they all, without any exception, agree that Levi Matthew was the author of the Gospel.

If you accept this, then of course you will find additional information. For example, there are a number of very long speeches in Matthew's Gospel. You may wonder where they come from. Modern critical theologians would say they were all put together decades after the event, basically invented from scraps of information

here and there.

Anyone taking classical history seriously would ask why anyone should make that assumption. If we believe that there was an individual, Matthew Levi, who also was a disciple and who was a tax official in Galilee, we know that such a person would be capable of writing shorthand. This was part of his professional skills. People like him at this time in Galilee, Palestine, Egypt, Rome and Greece knew shorthand.

The most probable scenario is that Matthew was there, an eyewitness who made shorthand notes of what Jesus said. The first complete Gospel-and I think that's one of the very few areas where there is almost unanimous agreement-is Mark. When Matthew got it, he could use his own shorthand notes of the sayings and incorporate them into his improved, enlarged, augmented version of Mark's Gospel. Thus we have the Gospel of Matthew, which includes all those long speeches missing from Mark.

So the simple answer, the historical answer-and most historical answers are simple and straightforward-is that Matthew could very well have been the author of that Gospel. There are many more arguments in favor of Matthew's authorship than there are against it.

GN:As noted in your book, we live in an age consumed by doubt, but desperate for certainty. You also stated: "There is a general weariness with secularism and its aversion to clear morality." Do you believe that helping establish the validity and authenticity of the New Testament text is critical to restoring a basis for a moral revival in the Western world?

CPT: Thank you for this question! My straightforward answer would be yes. One of the problems with the present attitude of most New Testament scholars and theologians toward the reliability or trustworthiness of the Gospels is that they become available to change in tastes of any era. The spirit of the times is more important than the Holy Spirit, to put it in a nutshell.

No ethical or moral direction follows from a collection of texts that is interpreted as very subjective, that could have been collected in the late first or the second century but for that matter might as well have been collected in the 19th or 20th century.

Indeed, some theologians treat the texts as though they are 19th- or 20th-century documents and interpret them as such. But, if you have documents that go back right to the period when those events all happened, then our attitude to those texts

must change. They suddenly become historical documents of the very period where these people walked and lived and preached and were killed.

Jesus Christ says that there are certain things we should do or should not do, particularly if we want to be His followers. So, if that's something we must take seriously, as being reported by people who knew and saw and heard Him, then we cannot escape the consequences.

This of course means that in a period where yardsticks disappear one after the other very quickly, and people are looking for points of reference and orientation, the Gospels have once again become and will remain yardsticks for moral and ethical values in society at large and in our own personal lives.

GN:Is there a question I haven't asked that might prove helpful to our readers?

CPT: I would like to say that, in order to understand the historical background of the gospel, one doesn't have to be a papyrologist, one doesn't even have to be a historian. All it takes is to read the text very carefully. Look at what the Christians in Berea did in Acts 17. They searched the Scriptures day by day to find out if what Paul and Silas were saying was true.

Paul also said, "Examine all things; hold fast that which is good," at the end of his first letter to the Thessalonians. We are told to examine everything. That's what we should do. Paul wasn't speaking to classical historians or to papyrologists. He was speaking to the whole community of the Thessalonians, so we can understand this and follow it as eternally valid advice.

Let us go back to the texts, read them carefully, forget about all we think or assume that we already know, forget about our prejudices and our biases, scholarly or otherwise, and we'll make an enormous amount of discoveries ourselves, understanding why those texts are what they really are-historical documents of the first century with Jesus Christ in its center. ***GN***

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